Trembling Tenors of Life: A Psycho-social Approach to Trauma in Select Arab and Iranian Women Writings in English

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"Women, by their nature, are not only more resilient than men but also more adaptable to adverse situations. The history of women's rights is one of resilience, persistence, and strength in the face of immense challenges. Despite the obstacles, women are the guardians of change and progress."

-Shirin Ebadi

Arab and Iranian women writings have attained much acclaim in the contemporary literary world. Political events in the recent decades and their repercussions in West Asia and the Middle East have had their toll on the social and cultural life of Arabs and Iranians to a great extent. Migration and human rights violations in these nations have made the ethnic writers as well as those in diaspora to delve deep into the psyche of the average Arab and Iranians and represent it in literature. Arab Iranian Literary Renaissance is transcending new horizons as these women writers in English, especially those who are writing fiction, create a world of enlightenment through tales of resistance and revolts. Significant literature produced by the women writers come to the spotlight because of the narrative techniques employed by them.

The works can be evaluated on the basis of the post-colonial theories of trauma which have become an integral part of post- colonial fiction. Concerns related to cultural and relational identification lie at the heart of these works. Trauma of war, emotional deprivations, and trans-national identity are expressed through their writings. Literature from Asia received wide acclaim in world literature when Naguib Mahfouz of Egypt won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988, for depicting life in Cairo, in his Cairo trilogy. The Man Booker International Prize of 2019 is bagged by the Omani writer

Jokha Alharthi for her fiction *Celestial bodies*, which builds around the pressures on three generations of an Omani family as a result of social change. The global acceptance and prominence of literary works from Asia increased significantly following the recognitions received, underscoring the growing appreciation for diverse narratives and cultural perspectives from the region. The present study deals with the works of renowned writers like Azar Nafisi from Iran – *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in books* Basma Abel Aziz – *The Queue* from Egypt and Jokha Alharthi from Oman – *Celestial Bodies*.

Thesis Statement

The works under study, explores the multifaceted struggles of Arab and Iranian women against oppressive regimes, cultural constraints and their transformative resilience, through the lens of trauma studies in literature.

Objectives of study

To analyse how trauma shapes the identity and resilience of female protagonists in contemporary Arab and Iranian literature.

To explore how women's socio-political expression and its psychological impact are portrayed in the selected novels.

To contribute to the understanding of psycho-social dimensions of trauma in literature and its implications for feminist and post-colonial studies

To analyse if the responses to trauma are gender-centric

To analyse how literature, fine arts and crafts can help in alleviating the mental agony due to trauma.

Methodology

The researcher studies the novels with a psycho-social approach and makes use of the contemporary theories of trauma for the in-depth analysis of characters. This research adopts formatting techniques and regulations that comply with the MLA Handbook – 9th edition.

Chapterisation

The study is divided into five chapters including Introduction and Conclusion.

Chapter I- Introduction

In the first chapter a brief introduction is given to the Arab and Iranian worlds of Literature from the medieval to the modern times. The chapter discusses the political backgrounds of the Iranian Revolution and its repercussions in the country as reflected through Literature. It also analyses Arab Spring and its impact on Egypt and delineates the unstable government under military rule capturing the spirit of resistance and despair, a period marked by political turbulence and wide spread disillusionment. It also gives a picture on the unique perspective of trauma focusing on transgenerational and collective experiences within the context of Oman.

Classical Arab and Iranian Literature serve as a gateway to the cultural and intellectual legacy of these countries. The rich tradition of classical Arab literature has produced a vast body of work that encompasses its philosophy, history, poetry, and narrative techniques. Through English translations, these timeless texts have become accessible to a global audience, offering profound insights into the cultural, intellectual, and social landscapes of the Arab and Iranian world.

The great Persian poets like Rumi, Hafez and Saadi and Omar Khayyam have left an indelible mark on world literature, with their works exploring themes of love, spirituality, and the human connection with the divine. Rumi's mystical poetry, in particular, has transcended cultural and linguistic boundaries, influencing both Eastern and Western thought. This literary tradition continued into modern times, with contemporary writers like Sholeh Wolpe **ca**rrying forward the legacy through her translations and original works. Wolpé's contributions have made classical Persian literature, such as *The Conference of the Birds* by Attar, accessible to modern audiences, while her own poetry reflects themes of exile, identity, and cultural dialogue. Alongside Wolpé, other Iranian fiction writers such as Shahriar Mandanipur have brought to light the complexities of modern Iranian life, particularly in the context of gender, politics, and revolution. Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* reflect the complexities of present-day Iranian political and social life through deeply personal narratives. *Persepolis*, Satrapi's graphic memoir, poignantly captures her experiences of growing up during the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, offering a vivid critique of political oppression, censorship, and the struggle for personal freedom.

Women writers surge up from Diaspora as well to represent their protest against this traumatic state of women in Iran and certain Arab nations. Diaspora offers them absolute freedom to give expression to their literary and political activism. Edward Said in his book *Out of Place* says that today, most of the literary, political and cultural activity of the Arab world is taking place beyond Arab borders with most prominent Arab authors, politicians, opposition leaders residing in and writing from their Diaspora dislocations (123). Moreover, Women authors dare to write about topics deemed taboo in their nation. They are also referred to as hybrid writers or hyphenated writers indicative of their multiple identities due to diaspora culture.

Prominent women authors from Egypt, Iran, and Oman have made significant contributions to literature by exploring the trauma experienced by women in their societies. In Egypt, Basma Abdel Aziz, with her dystopian novel *The Queue*, examines the psychological and social impact of authoritarianism on women. Nawal El Saadawi, in works like *Woman at Point Zero*, brings attention to issues such as female genital mutilation and patriarchy, while Miral al-Tahawy, in *Brooklyn Heights*, delves into the trauma of displacement and cultural identity. Ahdaf Soueif, in *The Map of Love*, blends personal and political trauma, focusing on women caught in the tides of revolution. In Iran, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* reflects on the trauma of living under a repressive regime and the loss of freedom for women,. Zoya Pirzad's *Things We Left Unsaid* addresses the emotional turmoil of women restricted by societal expectations in Iran.

Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies* explores the generational trauma of Omani women trapped between tradition and modernity, while Bushra Khalfan and Huda Hamed also examine the internal conflicts and societal constraints that women in Oman face. These authors shed light on the emotional, psychological, and social trauma endured by women in their respective cultures, offering a critical examination of gender oppression in the Middle East on the basis of their identity and belief. Literature produced by these women writers come to the spotlight because of the narrative techniques employed by them.

Even though much has been discussed about women's oppression and empowerment, less attention has been given to how the writings of contemporary ethnic and Diasporic Arab women writers portray gross human rights' violations and redefine

trauma narratives, moving beyond Western concepts of victimhood, leading to self-discovery and resilience.

Chapter II – Power, Oppression, and the Fragile Self: Exploring Trauma and Tyranny in Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue*

In the second chapter, the researcher analyses how the traumatised women take refuge in literature, arts and craft to combat the mental trauma they are subjected to, due to the repressive regime in Iran. Azar Nafisi's Memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran* highlights the soothing effect of literature on troubled minds. Iran's social and cultural contexts are deeply interwoven, creating a complex and multifaceted national identity. It is a country of contrasts, balancing ancient traditions with modern aspirations, and navigating a challenging international landscape while seeking to maintain its sovereignty and regional influence.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 brought about a dramatic shift in Iran's political and social order, with the establishment of the new regime. The regime curtailed women rights significantly disappointing many Iranians, particularly women, who had initially hoped for greater freedom and social justice. While the revolution aimed to overthrow the Shah's autocratic regime, it quickly transformed into a theocratic state that imposed strict interpretations of Islamic law.

The new government implemented mandatory hijab laws, requiring women to cover their hair and wear modest clothing in public. This was seen as a symbol of the regime's repressive policies and an infringement on personal freedom. Additionally, the family laws that had been liberalized prior to the revolution were rolled back, restricting women's rights in areas like marriage, divorce, and child custody. Iranian women

realised that despite their significant role in the revolution they were marginalized in the new political landscape. Employment opportunities for women diminished, and many were pushed out of public life or relegated to traditional roles. The regime's rhetoric often emphasized women's roles as mothers and homemakers, contrasting sharply with the aspirations for equality and participation that many women had fought for during the revolution.

The events narrated in the Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* are interlaced with stories of the book club members consisting of several of her female students who met weekly at Nafisi's house to discuss works of Western literature, including the controversial 'Lolita' of Vladimir Nabokov and various other texts. They interpreted these texts, their philosophy and studied them in detail in the sociopolitical background of their own country. The resilience acquired by her students through literature and how they transformed their adversities into their advantage form the crux of the study. Trauma theories of Cathy Caruth, Soshanna Felman, Dauri Laub and other theorists are used for the analysis of the mental make-up of characters and how they sustain themselves beyond their limits of tolerance.

Chapter III – Veils and Shadows: Navigating Trauma and Identity in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

The researcher delineates the life in contemporary Egypt with its military government and suppressive measures. Through the novel *The Queue* by Basma Abdel Aziz, the researcher points out how the oppressive control of the authoritarian regime known as "The Gate" creates identity crisis and existential trauma. The novel originally written in Arabic was translated into English by Elizabeth Jacquette. It portrays how political repression shapes both men and women differently, with a focus on the

resilience of female characters like Amani, who resist the system with determination, contrasting the often-passive acceptance or resignation seen in male characters like Yehya. This dynamic illustrates the broader themes of resistance, autonomy, and gender in a society weighed down by political subjugation, highlighting the resilience of women in the face of both political and patriarchal oppression. The novel deals with the themes of existential, physical and mental trauma experienced by the citizens when the authoritative government begins to violate the human rights.

Chapter IV – Echoes of Silence: Unraveling Trauma in Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies*

In the fourth chapter the researcher discusses the novel *Celestial Bodies* written by Jokha Alharthi. *Celestial Bodies was originally written in Arabic and translated into English* by Marilyn Booth. The novel explores the generational trauma of Omani women trapped between tradition and modernity, The author shed light on the emotional, psychological, and social traumas endured by women in their respective cultures, offering a critical examination of gender oppression in the Middle East on the basis of their identity and belief. The portrayal of trauma extends beyond the typical struggles of power or war, delving into the complexities of cultural, transgenerational, and collective trauma, particularly as it affects the women characters. The novel explores how women bear the weight of generational expectations, cultural restraints, and the legacies of slavery, which collectively shape their experiences of trauma. In contrast to men, whose struggles often centre around social status and traditional power roles, the women develop resilience by navigating familial responsibilities, emotional burdens, and societal preoccupations. This resilience is seen in their ability to find strength within the domestic sphere, their relationships, and their roles as caretakers, highlighting the gendered dimensions of trauma and survival across generations.

Chapter V – Conclusion

In conclusion, the study explores how socio-political upheavals and oppressive regimes in Iran, Egypt, and Oman have shaped the lives and experiences of individuals, particularly women, as reflected in contemporary literature. The effects of imperialism, revolutions, and authoritarian governments have created a pervasive atmosphere of repression and trauma, with women often facing additional layers of subjugation and cultural restraint. Through the analysis of works like Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue*, and Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies*, the research highlights the resilience of women in the face of political and patriarchal oppression. While men in these narratives are often depicted as struggling with power dynamics and social status, women turn to literature, arts, and domestic roles as a means of coping, transforming their adversities into strengths. Ultimately, the study emphasizes how literature not only reflects the trauma of these societies but also serves as a powerful tool for resilience, empowerment, and the preservation of personal and cultural identity amidst oppressive forces.

The Arab and Iranian worlds are being transformed by war, conflict and strife. However, to allow people living within these borders and crossing them, is a task and they have a right to live a life of dignity. How this identity is developed and protected will be instrumental for the future of the region. Over 60 million refugees and displaced people are on the move around the world, and the Arabic speaking Middle East and North Africa are witnessing the largest displacement, the world has witnessed since World War II. Young people, especially children are the worst hit in the areas of conflict. The past year witnessed Europe and the US. struggling to deal with refugee flows, as over one million refugees arrived by sea and hundreds of thousands crossed land borders. It is at this juncture that the women writers of the Middle East and diaspora

endorse their protest and rave for empowerment and social change. They transform their resistance to the social system and the resultant trauma into impressive tales and present them before the world, shunning grounds for speculation. They also open new vistas of English literature providing scope for further investigation and research.

Scope for further study

- The intersectionality of trauma with respect to gender, race and other identities can be explored
- The issues PTSD can be examined beyond medical pathology through Trauma studies in Literature
- The role of trauma studies in creating a stress-free environment at home, workplace and society.

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